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Guest columnist

Evidence is clear: No MIAs being held

WASHINGTON — No Americans are being held against their will in Indochina.

That was the conclusion of the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, which conducted a 15-month investigation in 1975-76.

I was chairman of that committee. I believed strongly in the findings of the report then, and my position has not changed since, based on information provided to me from the Department of Defense over the past seven years.

I spoke this week with Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who reaffirmed that there currently is no evidence to prove that Americans are being held against their will.

All told, I made 12 trips to Southeast Asia during and after the war. After the war, I was outspoken in calling for a full accounting of what had happened to the brave Americans who were still listed as prisoners of war or missing in action.

The select committee held 24 open hearings and 17 private sessions, in addition to conducting countless private investigations and reviews of files of missing servicemen at the Defense Intelligence Agency. Among the groups with whom we held extensive discussions were returned U.S. POWs, officials of U.S. intelligence agencies, families of MIAs, religious officials and diplomats from other countries stationed in Southeast Asia, the U.S. high commissioner on refugees and the International

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Red Cross, plus Department of State and Department of Defense officials.

We agreed that based on the evidence gathered, no Americans were being held captive in that part of the world. We did recommend that this country remain active in gathering information about our MIAs and work for the return of remains, but we concluded that a total accounting of all those listed as MIAs will never be possible. Factors such as passage of time, remote location of some aircraft crash sites, weather conditions and lack of cooperation by the Vietnamese have made this effort difficult.

I might also point out that the proportionate number of Americans missing in Indochina is remarkably small compared to World War II and Korea. They total only 4 percent of the number killed in action, compared to 22 percent killed in World War II and 22 percent in Korea. This is even more notable when you realize that in Indochina, for the first time, we had no access to the battlefield after the war ended.

I know the families of MIAs have suffered a great deal during these years of uncertainty. Many of these families have accepted our findings. Others have not. I wish the results could have been different, but we had to base our findings on the facts, not our hopes.